

US Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
2007 Farm Bill Listening Session
November 9, 2005 in Phoenix, Arizona

The Nature Conservancy in Arizona

Introduction

Thank you for allowing this opportunity to provide input into the 2007 Farm Bill proposal. I am Jean Calhoun, Director of External Affairs with the Nature Conservancy. The Nature Conservancy is an international nonprofit conservation organization with chapters and offices in every state and over 1 million members. Our mission is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.

Here in Arizona, we participate on the State Technical Committee and appreciate the positive partnership we have with NRCS.

I'd like to comment on how farm policy can best achieve conservation and environmental goals.

On a global basis, temperate grasslands are the most endangered and least protected ecosystem. With its mission of working with landowners, NRCS is uniquely positioned to effect conservation of these lands. Grasslands preservation provides many benefits for Farm Bill funding, sustaining ranching and local economies while conserving watersheds and thus water resources. A couple of Farm Bill programs are positioned to accomplish grassland protection but they haven't been as effective as they could be.

Recommendations

1. The Grassland Reserve Program is the key program but it has suffered from insufficient funding. Its funding cap (and acreage cap) should be raised significantly and greater allocations should be provided to western states to reflect the importance of this ecosystem in this area of the country.
2. The other key program is the Farmland and Ranchland Protection Program. The most productive ranchlands in the west are native grasslands. In this case, the eligibility criteria need to be updated to meet the broader mission of protecting ranchland as well as farmland, and the match requirement lowered.
3. Both GRP & FRPP should focus on permanent protection rather than rental agreements. For conservation easements to be successful, both programs should allow not only NRCS but also local and nonprofit

organizations to design, hold, and monitor conservation easements- this will be more attractive to landowners and less burdensome for NRCS staff.

4. Grasslands need occasional fire to renew their productivity. A key management need in the west is to restore the natural fire regime for the health of grasslands and woodlands. Farm Bill programs (EQIP and WHIP) can be used to support prescribed burn projects. As they do here in Arizona, NRCS in other states could leverage their resources by engaging in partnerships with state and private organizations to develop prescribed burning programs.
5. Farm Bill programs represent a huge investment of both time and money yet there is little understanding of the conservation effectiveness of the programs. To ensure an effective return on investment, the ecological outcome should be monitored. For every project funded, a monitoring component should be funded as well as the management action.
6. Finally, from a programmatic point of view, NRCS is pressured to spread the funding around equally, without regard to the ecological benefit of each project. While small projects have value, a more focused program is important to sustain larger landscapes and to prevent fragmentation. We recommend prioritizing funding for functional landscapes with intact grasslands and viable ranching operations.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.